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ABSTRACT

The research reviewed in this topical bibliography and commentary generally pursues two lines of inquiry: what exactly information literacy is, and how educators can apply theories of information literacy to the day-to-day problems of elementary and middle-school students. The research contains a particular emphasis on the inability of current elementary school curricula to relate class work to "real-world" problems and produce students who are adapted to an economy based more on information than labor. The research reviewed in the topical bibliography and commentary both argues and demonstrates through successful classroom experiments the superiority of the information literacy program in achieving such results. Contains 5 references and annotated links to 3 Internet resources. (RS)

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Information Literacy: Classroom Applications

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Carl B. Smith, Editor
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Introduction

The research reviewed in this summary generally pursues two lines of inquiry: (1) What exactly is information literacy? (2) How can we apply theories of information literacy to the day-to-day problems of elementary and middle-school students? The research contains a particular emphasis on the inability of current elementary school curricula to relate class work to "real-world" problems and produce students who are adapted to an economy based more on information than labor. The research reviewed below both argues and demonstrates through successful classroom experiments the superiority of the information literacy program in achieving such results.

Information Literacy Movement

Erick Plotnick's essay of 1999 both narrates the history of the information literacy *movement* in contemporary education and attempts to provide a succinct definition of its precepts and objectives. The information literacy movement can trace its origins to the early 1980's with the formation of the American Library Association (ALA) Presidential Committee on Information Literacy (Breivik, 2000). According to Plotnick, a predominant theme in the research disseminated by this and similar organizations is that information literacy is a *process* and that its skills must be taught in the context of the *overall process*. What is meant by the assertion that information literacy is a *process* is simply that it cannot be taught independently of other subjects in the school curriculum, but must be integrated into the methods of instruction used to teach all school subjects: English/language arts, social studies, history, science and math.

A major impetus to the information literacy movement has been the notion that, with the advent of Internet technology and other research technologies, the economy of the United States and much of the world entered the *Information Age*. Information has become, according to Plotnick and most of the authors reviewed in this summary, a kind of currency or capital, even a replacement for capital. Plotnick contends that the economy has undergone a shift from "an economy based on labor and capital to one based on information." (2). This requires even on the lowest levels of production a satisfactory level of informational literacy: all workers will have to know "how to interpret information" (2). Plotnick provides short summaries of current predictions on how information technology will change the character of work in the near future. He argues that an economy based on

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information will create a workplace in which workers on all levels will be required to actively participate in the management of their company: it is for this reason that the educational system must generate workers "who possess skills beyond those of reading, writing and arithmetic" (2).

Developing a Curriculum

From the passages cited above we can see that Plotnick's essay emphasizes the belief that a curriculum designed according to the goals of information literacy will be particularly suited to "real-world" or "real-life" problems that students will encounter both within the academic environment and in the world of work. A more pointed discussion of this aspect of information literacy occurs in Lawrence Erickson (1998). Erickson is a severe critic of what he calls "classical literacy," which he contends is the dominant mode of instruction in elementary school classrooms. For Erickson, the "classical literacy" curriculum is one which emphasizes the reading of fictional literary texts.

Currently, classical literacy is in control (at least in America, but not in European or Asian schools, which prepare students for work and life in society outside of school [Daggett, 1994]). The heroes that U.S. teachers encounter at national literacy conferences are authors, illustrators and poets. Teachers know what to do with fiction. In addition, the great treasury of stories from around the world fosters the classical literacy approach. Children are engaged by excellent stories; they learn story structure concepts as well as literature themes, titles, and names of authors. Well-conceived classical literacy lessons pay off by initiating success in reading and writing. (Erickson 2).

Erickson blames the dominance of classical literacy for the phenomenon known as the "fourth grade slump," in which students who are encountering for the first time texts from the sciences and social sciences develop reading problems from these "unfamiliar text structures" (2). He proposes a de-emphasis of fictional texts in favor of non-fictional narratives and texts drawn from the social sciences, and mentions a number of classroom exercises which incorporate information literacy.

While much of Erickson's essay is concerned with establishing a dichotomy between classical and informational models of literacy, an essay by Cynthia J. McDermott and Sharon Setoguchi, both teachers, attempts to demonstrate that the teaching of fictional texts can establish the sort of "real-world" literacy that is the goal of the informational literacy program. Though the term "information literacy" is not mentioned once in the article and the teachers show no obvious influence from the movement, their pedagogical experiment does correspond to the goals of the informational literacy movement as set forth by Plotnick and Erickson, in so far as they de-emphasize the aesthetic appreciation of the fictional text (Carolyn Meyer's *Rio Grande Stories*) in favor of a mode of instruction encouraging the development of "real-world" skills. In this case, the students (all of whom had been judged among the most disengaged and "at-risk" of the student body) were required to make a quilt incorporating their favorite themes and moments from the fictional text. The students were also required to pair up with members of another class reading the same text, and to correspond with their "pen-pal" about the book as an alternative to paper-writing. The quilt project allowed students to develop organizational and cooperative skills, and was considered a success by the students, the teachers, and the author of the fictional text herself, who was later presented with the quilt.

Study of Children

The theme of "real-world knowledge" is an element of a long study Susan B. Neuman and Kathleen Roskos. Neuman and Roskos (1997) are concerned with investigating the "literacy" demonstrated by small children (pre-schoolers) within play settings. That their study shows the influence of the information literacy program is demonstrated by their expanded definition of "literacy" in most current literature on the subject, the term no longer designates the mastery of written texts, but rather a broader range of a problem-solving phenomena which takes place both in academic and non-academic environments. The results of their ethnographic study seemed to demonstrate that the traditional understanding of the young child as an empty slate is no longer valid for educational practice, and that young children show great ability to acquire situational knowledge and formulate procedures with little or no help from adults:

Results of this study indicated that in the course of play activities, children demonstrated declarative knowledge about literacy (e.g., roles, and names of literacy objects), procedural knowledge (e.g., routines), and strategic knowledge (e.g., metacognition). In these contexts, 3- and 4-year-old children adapted the tools of literacy for specific purposes and engaged in strategic behaviors in a variety of problem-solving situations, giving evidence to the rich repertoire of literacy knowledge and inventive heuristics they bring to these informal settings. (1)

The major thrust of Neuman and Roskos' study is that very young children acquire much of their literacy (linguistic and informational) situationally that on their own they do a great deal of inquiry into written language, much of it through play. "As they engage in these meaningful activities," they write, "children develop knowledge about the forms and functions of written language in situational contexts" (1).

Conclusion

The cognitive research of Neuman and Roskos reinforces arguments made by Plotnick and Erickson that school curricula should emphasize the connection of students' literacy problems to real-life situations, this time by arguing that the simulation of real-world activity in the classroom (solving problems as a group, making a quilt about a novel rather than explicating the novel with methods that the students are unfamiliar with) may assist the students in learning the materials.

Internet Resources

*The Information Literacy Movement of the School Library Media Field: A Preliminary Summary of the Research
This article provides an overview of the history of the information literacy movement, discusses its practice in school libraries since the late 1980s, and provides information on six popular models of information literacy. It was written by David V. Loertscher and Blanche Woolls from the San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science.
http://witloof.sjsu.edu/courses/250.loertscher/modelloer.html

* Teaching Information Problem Solving in Primary Schools: An Information Literacy Survey by Penny Moore, Research Manager, The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand, Wellington. This article discusses how to examine the way educators approach the task of developing children's information literacy as well as children's ability to find and use information. http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla63/63moop.htm

*The Big 6 Skills Information Problem-Solving Approach to Library and Information Skills Instruction web site
The Big Six represents a systematic approach to information problem-solving. It is a systematic alternative to traditional K-12 frameworks that focus on location and access skills.
http://www.Big6.com/

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